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SUBJECT: Air Pollution in South China: Academics and Research
Scientists Claim Situation Is Worse Than Government Admits

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Ref: A) Guangzhou 27482
B) Guangzhou 30165
C) Hong Kong 3633

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Academics and research scientists in Guangdong, who are increasingly concerned about the region's serious air pollution but feel pressured to tone down their comments lest they face cuts in research funding, are interested in learning more about U.S. EPA's experience, especially its air quality research and management technologies. Scientists acknowledge that lack of transparency for existing air pollution data is a major problem, both for research and policy making, while resource limitations prevent more comprehensive, long-term studies and data collection. Provincial and municipal government officials claim that the regional air quality has improved in recent years, citing what the academics and scientists refer to as unreliable statistics. While public rhetoric is moving in the right direction, bureaucratic wrangling remains an obstacle as local leaders balance environmental concerns with the need for continued economic growth. Chinese officials and academics welcome a possible U.S. TDA study on expanding the region's environmental monitoring network. End Summary.

Air Quality a High Priority Issue

¶2. (U) Air pollution in South China is a high priority environmental and political issue. Academics and research scientists in Guangdong are concerned about the rapidly deteriorating air quality and visibility in the Pearl River Delta (PRD), especially pollutants of immediate concern in the PRD region such as respirable particulate matter (PM) and ozone. They have published a series of papers containing clear data describing the severely deteriorating air quality in the PRD. In contrast, provincial and municipal

government officials claim that the regional air quality has improved in recent years, citing what the academics and scientists refer to as unreliable statistics.

Data at a Premium

¶3. (SBU) Lack of transparency for air pollution data is a major problem, both for research and policy making. Research scientists must often resort to "guanxi," or personal connections, to obtain even limited air pollution monitoring and emissions data. In some cases, they must pay to obtain the data. Scientists believe that the provincial and municipal governments should more actively promote data sharing, starting with government-sponsored projects. Should the academics and researchers push the point on air quality, they find that their opinions are either ignored, or if voiced too strongly, could lead to the government stopping their funding altogether.

Need for More Resources and Better Coordination

¶4. (SBU) A large-scale intensive field study, the Campaign of Air Quality Research Experiment (CARE), was conducted in the PRD this summer. In July 2006, key photochemical pollutants, respirable particulate matter (PM), ozone, their precursors, and meteorological data were monitored. More than 20 municipal Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) monitoring sites in the PRD participated in this study in an effort to improve their understanding of the regional formation and transport of PM and ozone. The CARE team leader said that he would like to conduct a year-round study, but lack of resources and coordination difficulties prevent this. The team hopes that the PRD authorities and the USG will sponsor such

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studies in the future.

Desire to Learn More from EPA

¶5. (U) Researchers and even a number of South China Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) officials have expressed strong interest in learning more about U.S. EPA's experience and its air quality research and management technologies, such as the Models-3 Air Quality Modeling System, SMOKE Emission Processing System, AIRNow Air Quality Forecasting and Notification System, the U.S. emissions trading system, and the ongoing U.S. EPA fuel quality improvement project in Beijing.

Enthusiasm for Possible TDA Study

¶6. (U) Chinese officials and scientists welcomed the idea of a U.S. Trade and Development Agency (TDA) feasibility study on expanding the PRD's monitoring network. They also indicated that they plan to purchase at least some environmental monitoring equipment from U.S. companies.

Comment: Things Are Changing, Slowly

¶7. (SBU) While the public environmental rhetoric is moving in the right direction (see refs A through C for PRD authorities public recognition of the severity of the air pollution problem), bureaucratic wrangling remains an obstacle as local leaders balance environmental concerns with the need for continued economic growth. Despite potential retaliation, scholars and scientists appear willing to continue to speak their minds and put some public pressure on the authorities. While progress towards pollutant emission reduction is possible, rapid change is not likely.

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